DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 486 CG 028 008

AUTHOR Daniels, Judy; Pier, Patricia; D'Andrea, Michael
TITLE Homeless Students' Perceptions of School Counselors: Implications for Practice.
PUB DATE 1997-07-00
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Children; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; *Homeless People; Pupil Personnel Services; School Counseling; *School Counselors; Student Attitudes; Youth Problems
IDENTIFIERS Hawaii; Shelters

ABSTRACT

Youngsters who live in shelters face numerous challenges in school. Some of their experiences are highlighted here, along with an examination of the perceptions that these youth have of school counselors. The paper provides an overview of the impact of homelessness on school-aged youngsters and their families and discusses the results of a qualitative research study that was conducted among a group of homeless students. The numerous barriers and threats to the students' personal well-being and academic success are outlined, and it is argued that school counselors are in a pivotal position to help students with academic, social, and emotional development. For the qualitative study, 21 homeless, sheltered youth (ages 11 to 16) were interviewed by graduate-level counseling students. The results are discussed in terms of homeless students' familiarity and comfort with school counselors, their perceptions of the school counselor's role, the types of concerns with which homeless students need help, counselors' knowledge about whether they knew that students lived in shelters, and students' sources of assistance and help. Some of the implications that these answers hold for school counselors are presented. (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

RUNNING HEAD: Homeless Students' Perceptions

ED 411 486

Homeless Students' Perceptions of School Counselors: Implications for Practice

by

Judy Daniels

Patricia Pier

Michael D'Andrea

Manuscript Submitted to

ERIC/CASS

July 1997

Dr. Daniels and Dr. D'Andrea are faculty members with the Department of Counselor Education in the College of Education at the University of Hawai`i. Patricia Pier is a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts.

Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be sent to

Dr. Judy Daniels

Department of Counselor Education

1776 University avenue

University of Hawai`i, Manoa

Honolulu, HI 96822

808-956-4387

CGO28008

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J Daniels

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

This article examines the challenges homeless youngsters living in shelters experience in school. Specifically, their perceptions of school counselors and professional practice issues are discussed.

Homeless Students' Perceptions of School Counselors: Implications for Practice

Sue has been referred to the eighth grade counselor by her teacher because she easily distracted in class. After much probing by the counselor she finally breaks down and starts to cry as she talks about her living situation. "I can't stand where we live! There is no space or privacy and my whole family sleeps in one room. The shelter is dirty, people are loud and swear a lot, and there are so many rules. One rule is that you have to be in the shelter by eight o'clock, so some nights I just stay out with my friends. Since I can't have any friends over to spend the night, I always make excuses like we have relatives visiting. None of my friends at school know that I live in the shelter. I always have them drop me off at a friend's house and then I walk home, I am so ashamed of our living situation. The only phone we can use is the pay phone, and it is hard to have private conversations on a pay phone. I don't know how long I can keep this up, I don't think my mom understands how embarrassing this whole thing is."

The ninth grade social study's teacher referred Jack to the counselor because of his poor grades and inability to concentrate in class. From a quick review of his past academic records the counselor noted that Jack has been in three different schools in a period of four years. Previous records indicate that he has achieved average grades at the other schools he attended.

However, at this school he is performing below average and is getting failing grades in two subjects.

During the counseling session Jack reveals that his family has had no choice but to move several times over the past few years. For a while they were able to live with different relatives, however because of the small and crowded living space they were forced to leave and live in a public park. Recently they were placed in a shelter for homeless families.

Upon further questioning, the counselor learns that Jack has been very distracted from his school work. Jack tells the counselor, "I am so worried about my family because I overheard my mom arguing with the manager about being kicked out of the shelter. They have so many rules, and my older brother has been breaking a lot of them. If it happens one more time, they say they are going to kick us out. I don't want to go back to living in the park where we have to take cold showers and live in a tent. I've been in so many different schools. I can't stand the thought of moving again. It's embarrassing when the kids find out about our living situation. When we lived in the park, they made fun of us and tried to pick fights. I miss my friends back in my old neighborhood where we had a house and I haven't made any new friends here at this school. I just wish my mom would get a job and we could live in a house with a phone and a television like everyone else."

Jane is in the seventh grade and although she has been to the counselor several times she avoids talking about her family. When the counselor finally questions her about living at the homeless shelter, she looks surprised. "How do you know we live at the shelter? My mom told me not to tell you that's where we live! It's embarrassing. You know! Mom said you and my teacher will treat us differently if you know where we live. You're not going to tell my teacher are you?"

These vignettes are drawn from interviews which were conducted with youngsters living with their families in homeless shelters in a metropolitan area in Hawai`i. They portray common concerns raised by youth who are struggling with various types of concerns that homeless families have when they reside in a homeless shelter.

Homeless Students and Their Families

Recent estimates by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that more than 220,000 school-aged homeless children and adolescents are living with their families in this country (Solarz, 1992). Many of these youngsters and their parents suffer from a host of problems that characterize their lives. These problems include the debilitating impact of unemployment (Strong, 1992), substance abuse problems, domestic violence, and other physical and mental health difficulties (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). As a result of the numerous problems homeless

children and youth typically experience, it is little wonder that researchers have noted that 43% of students in this at-risk group do not attend school and approximately 30% of those who are in school have fallen behind by one or more grade levels (Hall & Maza, 1990).

Attending school can also become problematic since homeless students are often negatively stigmatized by their peers and other persons who work in the school setting (Daniels, 1995). In an effort to be accepted by their peers and escape the possibility of being negatively labeled by school personnel, homeless youngsters often go to great lengths to hide their homeless status. By keeping their living situation a secret, homeless students frequently isolate themselves from their peers and school personnel who could be supportive and provide assistance with some of their immediate problems and concerns (Daniels, Pier, D'Andrea, & Salvador, 1994).

Tower (1992) reported other types of reactions homeless youngsters have toward school personnel. This includes questioning their trustworthiness, testing their limits, rebelling against them as authority figures, and viewing them as overly punitive. These are natural responses that typically surface from a life style that is often unpredictable and riddled with inconsistent parenting and poor adult role models. In order to permeate the protective walls that homeless youngsters often

erect to conceal their hurt and shame, school staff members are challenged to design effective academic and psychological interventions.

Strong (1992) points out that academic success is a fundamental ingredient to overcoming the cycle of poverty and homelessness. However, academic goals cannot be fully achieved without first addressing issues related to homelessness and its psychological impact.

The numerous barriers and threats to their personal well-being and academic success have led Strong (1992) to identify homeless students as the most vulnerable at-risk group of youngsters in the school setting. School counselors are in a pivotal position to assist these students with their academic, social, and emotional development. However, to be effective in providing intervention services that address the needs of this at-risk group of students, it is important that counselors understand how homelessness affects students and how it may influence who they turn to for assistance when they need help.

Given the need to better understand homeless students, this article is designed to serve a threefold purpose. First, it provides an overview of the impact of homelessness on school-aged youngsters and their families. Second, it discusses the results of a qualitative research study that was conducted among a group of homeless students residing in a government-subsidized shelter.

Third, the authors use the research findings to discuss their implications for the work school counselors do with homeless sheltered youngsters.

The term "homeless sheltered youngsters" is used to distinguish those students who reside in temporary government subsidized homeless shelters from those youths who are either classified as runaways or youngsters who are living with their families in makeshift settings outside of public supported shelters (i.e., in their cars, in tents in public parks, etc.). This distinction is made because researchers have noted that students that comprise each of these categories are distinguished by different needs and concerns associated with the unique contexts in which they live (Daniels, Pier, D'Andrea, & Salvador, 1994).

Method

Sample

A sample of 21 homeless sheltered youngsters participated in this study. They were all living with their parents in two different shelters for homeless families located in the Honolulu metropolitan area. The participants were selected from six public schools in two different school districts in Hawai`i. There were seven participants who were 11 and 12 years' old, 12 students who were 13 and 14 years' old, and two individuals who were 15 and 16 years' old. The mean age of the homeless

sheltered students who took part in this study was 13.2 years. The make up of this sample reflects the diversity of public school students in Hawai`i and included youngsters from Hawaiian, Chinese, Caucasian, Samoan, Filipino, Puerto Rican, and African American backgrounds.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers designed a set of semi-structured interview questions which focused on homeless youngsters' perceptions of their life and school experiences. The questions were specifically designed to elicit information about the students' perceptions of school counselors. Each interview took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete and included the following questions:

1. Do you know your school counselor?
2. How many times have you met with your counselor?
3. Are you comfortable going to your school counselor for help with your problems?
4. What types of things do you think school counselors are supposed to do?
5. What are some of the things you would like your school counselor to help you with?
6. Does your counselor know you live in a shelter? If yes, has it helped you with your problems? If no, why doesn't your counselor know that you live in a shelter?

7. Whom do you go to for help when you have personal or academic problems?

Procedures

The researchers recruited several graduate counseling students to help conduct the interviews. Written permission was obtained from the students' parents prior to conducting the interviews. It was made clear to all of the students who participated in this study that their participation was completely voluntary.

Once they had agreed to participate in the investigation, the youngsters were randomly assigned to one of the research assistants who explained the purpose of the study and proceeded to interview each student by asking them the set of questions listed above. The interviews were conducted at two different locations. One site was at a public elementary school which was located directly across the street from the shelter where the participants resided. The second location was in an office located in the homeless shelter. All of the interviews were conducted after school hours. Once the interviews were completed, the participants were provided snacks to eat.

Each interview was individually taped. A staff member who was not part of the research team was responsible for transcribing the tapes. By reviewing these transcriptions the investigators were able to analyze the students' responses to

each of the questions asked during the interviews.

Results

Familiarity and Comfort with School Counselors

Several themes emerged from the homeless students' responses about their familiarity with their school counselor. Although a majority of the participants indicated that they knew who their school counselor was (N=14), seven students stated that they did not know their counselor very well or at all.

When asked how many times they had seen their school counselor, 12 students reported that they had interacted with their counselor three or more times, four youngsters stated that they had seen their counselor less than three times, and five homeless students indicated that they had not seen the counselor at all during that school year.

When asked how comfortable they were with their school counselor, 14 students reported that they were comfortable talking to their counselor while seven participants stated they were not comfortable interacting with these professionals. In discussing why they were comfortable talking to their counselor, the majority of the participants indicated that their counselors were "approachable," "friendly," and that they were "able to joke around with them."

Perceptions of the School Counselors Role

Three main categories of responses emerged from the participants' statements regarding their understanding of the counselor's role in the schools. One category of responses included statements which indicated that the homeless students thought that counselors were supposed to listen, be empathetic, and ensure confidentiality while they assisted students with their general problems and concerns. A second theme which emerged reflected the homeless students' belief that the counselor's role was to help students with school-related problems which included: "fighting with other students," "classroom problems," "helping me get passing grades," "adjusting to a new school," and issues related to "discipline" in the school.

A third distinct area that was identified in the homeless students' responses focused on issues related to their home life and their personal concerns. In this regard, the homeless students indicated that they thought the counselor's role also involved discussing problems they may be having with their relationships with their parents, siblings, and peers.

Types of Concerns Homeless Students Would Like Help With

A number of common response patterns were identified when we analyzed the homeless students' responses to the question: "What are some of the things you would like your school counselor to help you with?" Their reactions to this question were clustered

into three main categories. First, the students' stated that they wanted assistance with problems related to school such as: "fighting with other students," "dealing with problems with their school work," resolving "conflicts with teachers and their principal," and learning to cope with the frustrations they felt when they were teased by other students because of their homeless status.

Second, the homeless youngsters indicated a desire to have the school counselor help them figure out ways of dealing with stresses and concerns related to their families. This included seeking ways to learn to deal with conflicts they had with their parents and siblings as well as acquiring more effective ways of coping with the general stress their families experienced as a result of not having adequate financial resources.

Third, the students repeatedly stated that they wanted their counselors to assist them with "friendship problems." This included learning how to "make friends when they moved to a new school" and "keeping friends" over a long period of time.

Counselors Knowledge About Residing in a Shelter

When asked whether or not their counselor knew that they were living in a homeless shelter for families, the responses were classified into two major areas. Nine participants said that their counselor knew they lived in a shelter while ten (10) others stated that their counselor did not know that they were

residing in a shelter. Two individuals were unsure whether the school counselor knew they were living in a shelter or not.

For those homeless students who stated that their counselor knew where they lived, four indicated that it did not necessary help them learn to cope with their problems more effectively. The remaining five students said that they were unsure about whether it had been beneficial.

The students who had not told their counselor about their living situation stated that they were too embarrassed or ashamed to discuss it with them. Several students also stated that they felt their counselor did not like youths who lived in the shelter and were hesitant about sharing this information with him or her.

Sources of Assistance and Help

Four major themes were noted in the students' responses to the question: "Whom do you go to when you need help for personal or academic problems?" Most of the students (n=11) cited family members as important sources of assistance when such problems occurred. Friends were also identified by five respondents as the persons they were most likely to turn to for help. Three participants identified various school personnel such as teachers and principals. Only two homeless students cited their school counselor as the person they would most likely turn to for help when they needed assistance with personal or academic problems.

Upon reviewing the results reported above, the reader should

be cautioned about the limited generalizability of the students' responses to the interview questions. However, their reactions to the interview questions presented in this qualitative study may provide insights into some of the issues and concerns that other sheltered homeless youths may experience. The implications of the findings of this exploratory study are discussed below.

Implications for School Counselors

The qualitative data generated from this investigation may help school counselors' gain greater sensitivity regarding some of the issues and concerns homeless sheltered students' experience. The results also offer information regarding the perceptions these at-risk students have about the counselor's role in the school setting.

The comments made by the homeless students and the common themes that were reflected in their interviews demonstrated that they were generally familiar with the counselor's role and function. However, given this familiarity, it was interesting to note that only two of the students stated that they would go to a school counselor if they needed help with personal or academic concerns.

To help increase homeless sheltered students' sense of confidence and trust in school counselors, we have outlined the following intervention strategies which counselors are encouraged to consider when working with this at-risk population.

1. School counselors should take the initiative to identify which students are currently living in local homeless shelters. In doing so, the counselor is better able to begin the process of providing outreach services with these at-risk youths. This may involve contacting staff persons at the local homeless shelters to discuss ways in which the school counselor may assist these students with their personal and academic needs.

2. Initiate contact with homeless students at school. Recognizing that many of the participants in the present study indicated that they were genuinely embarrassed by their homeless status, it is important that counselors are particularly sensitive and respectful of this issue. For this reason, school counselors are encouraged to establish an informal relationship with these students without necessary addressing the issue of homeless in their initial contacts with them.

3. Offering more in-depth personal counseling services. After the school counselor has developed a basic sense of trust as a result of his or her informal contacts with homeless students, it is important that he or she provides these youngsters with the opportunity to discuss their concerns about personal and/or academic issues in the context of a confidential counseling relationship.

4. Utilizing various outreach services. Noting that the students in the present study indicated that they would most likely turn

to their parents for help with personal and academic concerns, school counselors are encouraged to contact their parents at the homeless shelters. By initiating this sort of outreach, counselors can offer various types of supportive services. It is important, however, that the school counselor does not come across as an intrusive professional but rather, as one who is genuinely interested in listening to the types of concerns and stresses homeless parents face. In doing so, counselors demonstrate their respect for the parents' perspective and needs. After the school counselor has gained the trust and confidence of the homeless student's parents, he or she may offer additional services which include consultation about parenting skills.

5. Providing advocacy services. School counselors would also do well to work with homeless students' teachers and school administrators to increase their understanding of the multiple problems and stresses these at-risk students face in their daily lives.

6. Developing a more tolerant school climate. Because many of the homeless students who took part in this study indicated that they had often been teased by their peers because of their homeless status, it is vital that school counselors conduct guidance activities that are specifically designed to increase other students' respect and tolerance for human differences.

7. Developing peer counseling programs. Given that many of the

youngsters in this study also stated that they would turn to their friends for support when they were experiencing personal problems, counselors would do well to establish peer counseling programs as a way of expanding the natural helping networks for homeless students in the school setting.

In conclusion, this study examined homeless students' perceptions of the role and function of the school counselor. The results indicated that, although these at-risk students are generally aware of the school counselor's role, they are more likely to turn to their parents and friends for assistance with personal and academic problems. In light of these results, a number of intervention strategies have been proposed that are intentionally designed to increase the positive impact that counselors can have on this at-risk group of youths. Recognizing that the problem of homelessness will continue well into the 21st century, it is important that researchers continue to examine other aspects of homeless students' lives in order that counselors may come to understand new ways in which they might be able to foster the psychological health and personal well-being of this vulnerable group of youths.

References

Bassuk E.L., & Rosenberg, L. (1988). Why does family homelessness occur? A case-control study. American Journal of Public Health, 78(7), 783-788.

Daniels, J. (1995). Humanistic interventions for homeless students: Identifying and reducing barriers to their personal development. The Journal of Humanistic Education and Development, 33(4), 164-172.

Daniels, J., Pier, P., D'Andrea, M., & Salvador, D. (1994). Improving family environment: A group counseling intervention for homeless families. Honolulu, HI: The Institute for the Development of Homeless Families, University of Hawai`i.

Hall, J.A., & Maza, P.L. (1990). No fixed address: The effects of homelessness on families and children. Child and Youth Services, 14(1), 35-47.

Solarz, A.L. (1992). To be young and homeless: Implications of homelessness for children. In M. J. Robertson & M. Greenblatt (Eds.), Homelessness: A national perspective (pp. 275-286). New York: Plenum.

Strong, J.H. (Ed.). (1992). Educating homeless children and adolescents: Evaluating policy and practice. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Tower, C.C. (1992). The psychosocial context: Supporting education for homeless children and youth. In J. H. Strong (Ed.), Educating homeless children and adolescents: Evaluating policy and practice (pp. 42-61). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.